

an installation  
sept 26-oct 22 1986

# *a Garden for Contemplation*

s u s a n

b a r t o n

t a i t

gallery 111

university of manitoba

school of art



# *a Garden for Contemplation*

s | u | s | a | n

b | a | r | t | o | n

t | a | i | t



*Art and meditation  
compensate, penetrate  
and create each other.<sup>1</sup>*

LAMA ANAGARIKA GOVINDA

*The man with the magnifying  
glass takes the world as  
though it were new to him.  
If he were to tell us of the  
discoveries he has made,  
he would furnish us with  
documents of pure  
phenomenology.<sup>2</sup>*

GASTON BACHELARD

**S**USAN BARTON TAIT has created "a meditational space, incorporating energy transformation over time," in the form of a garden to be installed in Gallery I. I. I. from September 26 to October 22, 1986. The components that usually make up a "garden": a gate, a circular path, a central pond or a fountain, and plants, are all here and are arranged geometrically to conform with the style of a traditional formal garden. Beyond that, this garden has none of the other attributes one would normally expect to find in a "garden". It is not beautiful. It is not a blissful nor an abundant paradise we imagine the original garden before the Fall to have been. It is not the garden of carnal delights of Bosch, peopled by romping nudes and stranger creatures. Susan Barton Tait's garden consists of wildly growing grass and plants which vie for position with the aggressively multiplying fungi, while rust from metal found objects and pigments from other societal wastes stain and bleed on the surface of the sawdust base from which the garden grows. Here and there are murky pools of solidified resin. Even the fountain in the middle tries its best to affect the "ungardenness" of the garden. The traditionally requisite phallic form that proudly emits jets of life-giving water is here replaced by an unthreateningly horizontal and colorless centrepiece, which blows up dust, feebly, at labourious intervals. It is a metaphor for the pollution-ridden breath of life.

Susan Barton Tait's garden is for contemplation, and, perhaps, in this respect, it can best be compared, improbable as the suggestion may sound, with a Japanese tea garden. The Japanese garden is an environment which is carefully cultivated and furnished to create for the participant an atmosphere of harmony and tranquility for meditation towards spiritual renewal. Tait's garden functions in quite the opposite manner. It is cultivated to create an atmosphere leading the participant to active contemplation of the physical universe. However, it is the conscious experience of the artificially produced environment in both the Japanese tea garden and of Susan Barton Tait's garden which induces in the participant a state of meditation. Both gardens close the gap between art and life.

SAWDUST, which could variously be defined as industrial waste, as insulation material, and as energy

producing fuel, has been of considerable interest to Susan Barton Tait, the accumulation of which, on her studio floor, she had watched for some time, observing the color, smell, texture and sizes of the particles. She was particularly interested in its seemingly neutral characteristics—its appearance of sterility and its formlessness. She wondered what she might do with it and began to store it in small clear plastic bags that she found discarded among a video shop garbage. She filled each one and heat-sealed it. She says the repetitive action of filling and sealing became obsessive and when she ran out of the found bags, she made more and continued to stock pile these bags of sawdust in her studio space. Hundreds of these became building blocks for the four pillars which marked the architectural boundaries for a central sawdust-filled sarcophagus structure made of felt bricks. This is the dadaesque meditational installation piece which was shown in a gallery, Ace Art Inc., in Winnipeg, in January of this year.

During the period of this exhibition at Ace Art Inc., Tait noticed that moulds were beginning to form on the heretofore thought to be "sterile" sawdust within the plastic bags. The moulds were of beautiful hues of yellows and reds. The discovery of these mould forms gave rise in Tait to thoughts about the cycle of life, death and regeneration. We live in a society that consciously removes all reminders of death, and aging is regarded negatively. Here, the artist saw decay as beautiful transformations visibly occurring both in color and in pattern, and the idea of cultivating mould in a garden came to her almost immediately.

It is, however, one thing to conceptualize and quite another to actualize, or to document, formally a phenomenon. The difficulties inherent in cultivating and controlling a "mould garden" in a studio environment, not to mention its eventual transportation to a gallery space for exhibition scheduled in a specific time frame were enough initially to discourage Tait from attempting a "real" garden and so she decided to experiment at simulating one. Sawdust, Roplex, selected found objects (to be seen as societal waste), and sprinkled dye (simulating mould colors) were cast in resin in 11" x 8" x 1" forms. These, Tait refers to as "mould tiles." They were, however, less than satisfying for her purposes. Objects cast in resin tend to take on the characteristics of resin. They become encapsulated



into uniformly shiny, molasses-like color and texture, losing individual identities. The mould tiles are of curious interest in their own right since objects are seen as frozen in time, but Tait wanted her sculpture to point out the processes of change which occur in minute systems of living organisms in real time. Only a controlled environment of a properly cultivated garden can reproduce these phenomena and effect the kind of contemplation she required in the participant.

Early in the spring, Susan boldly converted her studio space into what came to look like a botanist's laboratory. At the beginning, five 4' x 8' plywood boards were placed on the floor and on tables to become the first garden "plots." Each board was layered with moistened sawdust and then covered with plastic sheets to encourage moulding. As the moulds began to form, seeds of grass and plants were thrown into the sawdust and were allowed to germinate and to sprout. Within a matter of weeks green grass and other vegetations were living in predatory relationship with the furry moulds. Further plots of garden are to be planted at different intervals so that the complete garden, on the date of the exhibition, will reveal stages of development of growth and decay. The phenomena of life, death and regeneration occur together in this garden and we are reminded of the concept of cyclical time which is lost in the mechanized technological world of linear time.

Susan Barton Tait's work, above all, alludes to the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. In walking through the garden, we focus down upon and become conscious of the minute transformations taking place before our eyes. We are made aware of the beauty inherent in this process of change. The artist, by the vehicle of this composition which juxtapositions natural elements and societal waste products, also points out to us the delicate balance which must be maintained if we are to look forward to regeneration necessary to continue the life cycle. Each phenomenon of change we observe is a system in itself, each dependent upon the other. Nothing happens in isolation, and we are forced to draw an analogy between ourselves and the larger ecological system in which we live and to question our own view of nature. It is a garden for contemplation.

Grace Thomson

1. Lama Angarika Govinda. *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness*. (Wheaton, Ill., U.S.A., Madras, India, London, England: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1976), pp. 151-152.
2. Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 155.
3. Notes from the artist to the writer.





DETAILS FROM GARDEN FOR CONTEMPLATION



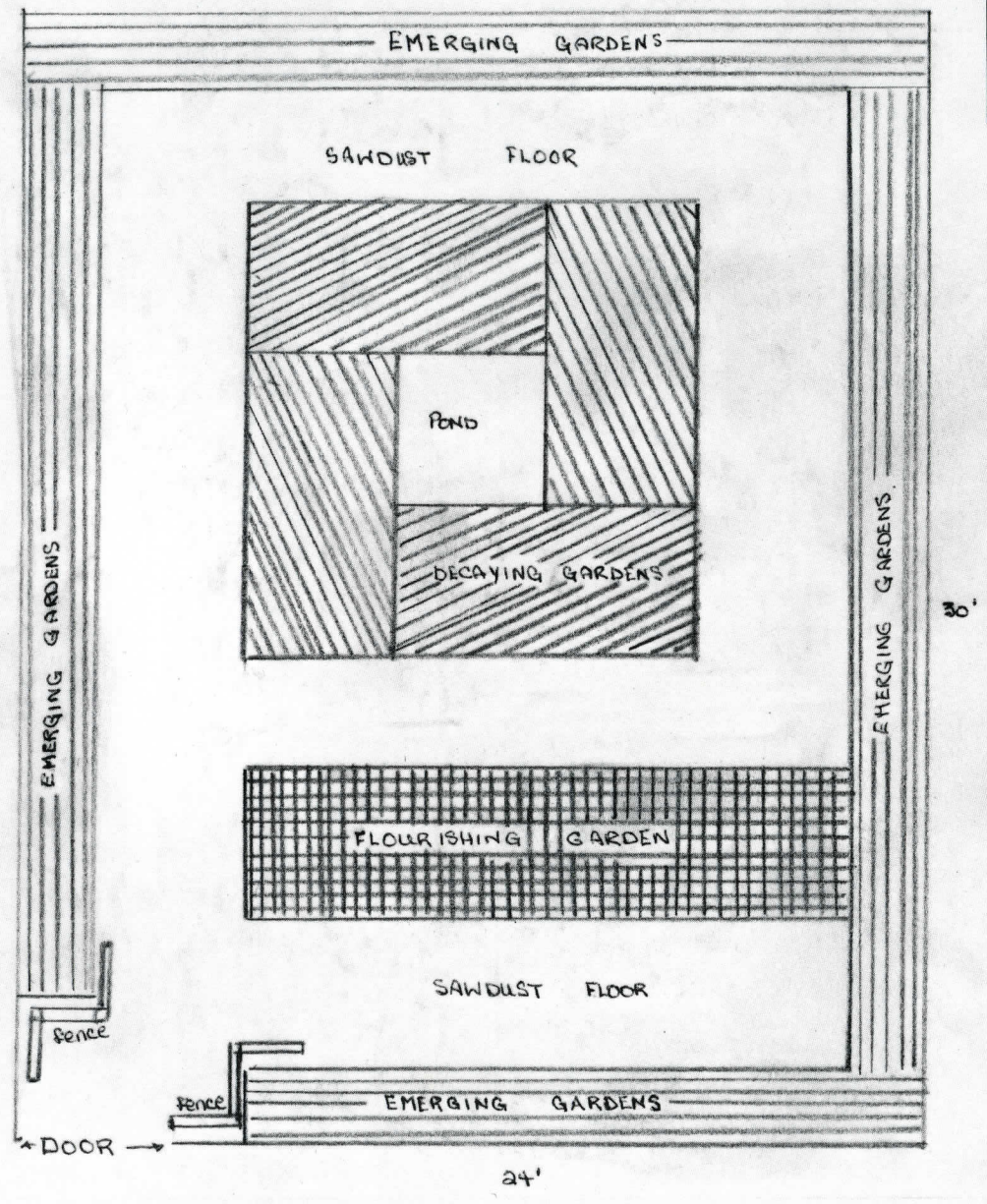








PLAN OF THE GARDEN



















#### WORKS IN EXHIBITION

1. Mould tiles,  
mixed media, app. 8" x 11"
2. A Garden for Contemplation,  
mixed media, 24' x 30'

Untitled installation at Ace Art Inc.



## Biography

### BORN

January 8, 1948

### CITIZENSHIP

Canadian

### EDUCATION

1970 BA (HON), Psychology, Mathematics;  
Queen's University, Kingston, Ont.

1971-72 Graduate courses, School Psychology,  
University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

1972-present Independent Study

1977-78 Felting apprenticeship with Aganetha  
Dyck, Winnipeg, Man.

1984 The Banff Center, Banff, Alta.

1984-85 Art History and studio, University of  
Manitoba.

### AFFILIATIONS

Canadian Artists Representation

Visual Arts Manitoba

Manitoba Artists for Women's Art

Plug-In/Inc.

### RELATED WORK

1985-present. Participant in the Artist in the  
Schools program run by the Manitoba Arts Council  
for Manitoba schools.

### ONE PERSON EXHIBITION

1986 An Installation, Ace Art, Inc., Winnipeg, Man.

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1977 Contemporary Winnipeg Crafts, Winnipeg  
Art Gallery

1977 Decorative Arts, Oseredok Gallery, Winnipeg

1978 "Fibres", Fibre Art Associates juried show,  
Fleet Galleries, Winnipeg

1978-82 Art Rental and Sales Gallery, Winnipeg  
Art Gallery

1978 Weavers Studio Fibre Show, Winnipeg

1978 Allied Arts Centre, Brandon, Man., a juried  
exhibition

1979 Genesis Gallery, Winnipeg

1980 Art and Artisan, Eaton Place, Winnipeg

1981-82 Eaton's Gallery of Fine Arts, Winnipeg,  
a juried exhibition

1982-84 The Inside Gallery, Winnipeg Art Gallery,  
juried

1984 "1984", A Juried Exhibition, Janet Ian

Cameron Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

1984 Reflections on Three Plains: Contemporary  
Crafts, Winnipeg Art Gallery

1984 La Diva Gallery, Banff Centre, Banff, Alta.

### AWARDS

1984 Manitoba Arts Council Project Grant  
(short term)

1984 Tuition Scholarship, Banff Centre

1984 Crafts Guild of Manitoba Bursary

1984 Manitoba Arts Council, Visual Arts Project  
Grant

1985 Manitoba Arts Council, Visual Arts Project  
Grant (short term)

### COLLECTIONS

Parks Canada, North Battleford, Sask., and Dawson  
City, Yukon

St. John's College, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

The Massey Foundation, Ottawa, Ontario

Manufacturers Life Assurance, ManuLife House,  
Winnipeg

Private collections in Canada and United States.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

1977 CBC radio review by Leonard Marcoe on  
Information Radio, "Contemporary Winnipeg Crafts"

1977 CBC Radio review by Leonard Marcoe on  
Information Radio, "Oseredok Exhibition"

1977 Brochure for "Contemporary Winnipeg  
Crafts", by the Winnipeg Art Gallery

1978 CBC radio review by Leonard Marcoe on  
Information Radio, "Fibres", Fleet Gallery

1978 Winnipeg Tribune, review by Dot From,  
"Fibres"

1979 Winnipeg Free Press, review by Leonard  
Marcoe, "Fibres"

1979 Winnipeg Tribune, Massey Foundation  
announcement by Dot From

1984 Catalogue, "Reflections on Three Plains:  
Contemporary Crafts, The Winnipeg Art Gallery

1984 Brochure for "1984", A Juried Exhibition,  
Janet Ian Cameron Gallery

1986 Robert Enright of CBC "24 Hours", "State  
of the Arts", filmed Installation at Ace Art for  
January 30, 1986 broadcast

1986 Videon, (David Cramer, John Prentice)  
presently filming for new artist series, fall 1986

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Grace Thomson for her invaluable help in curating the exhibition and writing the essay. I appreciate the knowledge gleaned and the equipment received from Tony Tascona, Larry Cummings, Joan Jarvis and my husband, Bob Tait. I also thank Norman Schmidt, designer of the catalogue, Dale Amundson, Director of Gallery I.I.I., and Tom Wood, Gallery Technician, for their assistance in the mounting of this exhibition.

*Susan Barton Tait*



## CREDITS

Exhibition Curator: Grace Eiko Thomson

Catalogue Essay: Grace Eiko Thomson

Catalogue Photographs: Susan Barton Tait

Installation Technician: Thomas Wood

Catalogue Design: Norman Schmidt

*Funding Assistance from  
The Manitoba Arts Council*







# SUSAN BARTON TAIT A Garden for Contemplation



Gallery 1.1.1.  
School of Art  
University of Manitoba

September 28 - October 22, 1986

Opening Reception: September 28, 2-5 p.m.

Funding Assistance from the Manitoba Arts Council